DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 046 043 CG 006 134

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TITLE On the Validity of Non-Promotion as an Educational Procedure.
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PUB DATE [69]
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Failure, Academic Performance, *Achievement Gains, Learning Processes, Performance Factors, *School Holding Power, Secondary School Students, *Student Characteristics, Student Improvement, *Student Promotion

ABSTRACT

The validity of the argument that non-promotion and subsequent repetition of the work in a grade will lead to an improvement in performance was examined. The subjects were 642 students in grades 8-11. The data was derived from the year-end marks that each student received in the subject areas, upon which the decision to promote or retain was made. Two sets of data were collected for each subject area, Yr. I and Yr. II, and these were compared for differences. The results indicated that while repeating students did show significant improvement in some subject areas (Yr. I: Yr. II: $p<.01$) this was not true of all subject areas. Further, even in cases of significant improvement the gain was hardly sufficient to justify a whole years extra work. Students repeating a whole grade and thus retaking in some cases subject matter that they had successfully completed once, showed a marked drop in performance. It was concluded that non-promotion could not be justified on the grounds that it would result in a meaningful improvement in performance as this is reflected in scholastic evaluative procedures. (Author)

On the Validity of Non-Promotion as an Educational Procedure

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INTRODUCTION

Virtually no studies have been done into the effect that non-promotion in a grade or subject/year has upon the achievement of students when such non-promotion occurs during the high school years. Indeed most of the work on this topic has dealt with elementary school students. Thus, for some years there has been general agreement that repeating a grade in school is associated with pupil maladjustment and with dropping out from school. Sandin (1944) reviewing the literature on pupil progress concluded that is was generally clear that: (1) Mastery of a subject was not assured by non-promotion; (2) Slow learners were not helped; (3) Non-

promotion had a poor effect upon discipline; (4) If promoted, the average student could make up the necessary work. Subsequently, other reviewers (Worth, 1959; Ellinger, 1965; Anderson, 1969) have reached similar conclusions. However, non-promotion in a grade, or more commonly, in a subject continues to be a common practice of schools in North America (Humphreys, 1965). Generally this practice of non-promotion is justified on the grounds that the actual performance of a student in a subject or grade will improve if he or she repeats the year. Perhaps teachers and administrators draw support for this view from such studies as Steadman (1959). Lobell (1954) and Stringer (1960) all of which showed that when students were carefully selected and were part of a small group non-promotion very often resulted in improved academic performance. However, when non-promotion is used more generally, little improvement in academic performance is shown (Arthur, 1941; Coffield & Bloomer, 1956; Kamii & Weikart, 1963).

A limitation of the present study and of others into the efficacy of non-promotion is that they are necessarily ex post facto exercises. Not surprisingly administrators are reluctant to allow researchers to take a group of "failures" and randomly assign them to "promoted" and "retained" groups. Only two studies (Arthur, 1941; Klene & Branson, 1929) were able to use this procedure, their findings suggesting that retention did not significantly improve performance in a subject.

The present study was designed to test the hypothesis that retention in a grade would result in improved subject performance. Subject performance was evaluated by the marks assigned pupils in each subject by teachers, this being the criteria upon which a decision to promoted or retain a student was made. This criteria was also selected since it appears to be

the one which by implication justifies the practice of non-promotion, i.e. teachers believe that by repeating a student will obtain "better" marks.

METHOD

Sample

The sample was drawn from the high schools in a large metropolitan area. Six schools were randomly selected and the students attending those schools who were repeating a grade made up the sample. In all the sample consisted of 642 students (GR 8: 208; GR 9: 157; GR 10: 122, GR 11: 155). High school students were selected because of the lack of studies into the effects of non-promotion upon high school students.

Procedure

Data were collected from the record cards of the sample students. A record was made of the final mark obtained in each subject in June of YR I. [It was on the basis of this final mark that each student had been required to repeat the year] Subsequently a record was made of the final mark in each subject in June of YR II. All marks for all subjects were on a 0-100 scale. Data were collected for the following grades and subjects:

GR 8 - English Lit., English Language, French Oral, French Written, Mathematics, Science, History.

GR 9 - English Lit., English Language, French Oral, French Written, Algebra, Geometry, Science, History.

GR 10 - English Lit., English Language, French Oral, French Written, Algebra, Geometry, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, History.

GR 11 - English Lit., English Language, French Oral, French Written, Algebra, Geometry, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, History.

Data Analysis

The data collected from each school were arranged in groups: by subject and by grade. In this manner a total of 35 subject groups was obtained each consisting of two sets of scores, marks for YR I and for YR II.

A 't' test for significant difference between related means was made on the two sets of scores in each of the 35 subject groups of data obtained.

Following completion of the foregoing analysis a further 't' test was made using only those scores obtained from Ss who in YR I have "passed" a particular subject and were then only "repeating" by virtue of having failed other subjects and then having to repeat the whole grade level.

RESULTS

In general the findings in this study support the general hypothesis made; namely that retention in a grade would result in improved performance by a S.as measured by teachers assigned marks.

Insert Tables 1 - 4 about here

Tables 1 - 4 make it plain that there is a significant improvement in Ss performance in all subjects for each grade. All differences occurred in a positive direction i.e. an improvement from YR I - YR II.

Insert Tables 5 - 8 about here

The performance of students who were repeating a subject previously passed is not so clear cut. Tables 5 - 8 show that in some subjects there is,

under these circumstances, no significant improvement. All differences except one (English Language for GR 8) were in a positive direction i.e. an improvement from YR I - YR II.

DISCUSSION

The results show that there is an improvement in the achievement of "repeaters" when they spend an additional year in a grade, notwithstanding the notorious unreliability of teacher-assigned marks as a means of assessing students ability (Thorndike, 1969). However, having said this the results must be further looked at to ascertain if they really offer support for the practice of having students repeat a grade or subject.

The results of this study indicate that though there is an improvement in achievement it appears only to be a small improvement. The question thus arises as to whether or not the improvements that may be expected in the light of these results is sufficiently large to justify an extra year in a grade? In short, where is the line to be drawn between what is a worthwhile improvement in achievement and what is not? Coffield & Bloomers (1956) in their study on the effects of non-promotion raised the same question and concluded that the improvement shown was generally not worth the time taken to achieve it even if one ignored the other well known undesirable side effects of non-promotion. This would seem a sensible conclusion to reach here. A look at Tables 1 - 8 shows that in most cases increases in scores are very small and that this is particularly so for subjects where the means of assessing student performance is noteably subjective; e.g. English Lit., English Language, French Oral. Clearly which subject a student repeats will effect any prediction as to what improvement may be expected.

The results support the notion that repeating a whole grade is particularly wasteful when it means that a student has to repeat work he previously completed satisfactorily. Tables 5 - 8 show that for virtually all the subject/grade groupings in this category the improvement was so small as to be educationally meaningless.

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrate how meager are the improvements in achievement that are gained by non-promotion in the light of these findings teachers and administrators should be very careful before predicting that the repeating of a whole grade or a subject/year will result in an educationally meaningful improvement in performance.

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GRADE VIII. BY SUBJECT. ALL STUDENTS SAMPLED.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS.

SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I-YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE
Eng. Lit.	207	5.2	6.5	p <..01
Eng. Lang.	206	4.2	5.6	p <..01
Fr. Written	202	11.7	13.4	p < .01
Fr. Oral	204	6.5	7.5	p < .01
Mathematics	202	18.7	18.2	p < .01
Science	102	9.3	7.4	p < .01
History	207	12.6	15.5	p < .01

GRADE IX. BY SUBJECT. ALL STUDENTS SAMPLED.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS.

SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I_YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE
Eng. Lit.	156	6.9	5.8	p < .01
Eng. Lang.	157	4.3	5.7	p < .01
Fr. Written	153	14.6	15.5	p < .01
Fr. Oral	154	7.6	8.8	p < .01
Algebra	148	28.4	22.4	p < .01
Geometry	139	21.8	15.7	p < .01
Science	97	13.6	8.9	p < .01
History	156	10.8	11.6	p < .01

GRADE X. BY SUBJECT. ALL STUDENTS SAMPLED.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS.

SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I-YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE
Eng. Lit.	120	6.9	6.2	$p < .01$
Eng. Lang.	121	4.3	5.4	$p < .01$
Fr. Written	119	10.9	10.9	$p < .01$
Fr. Oral	120	8.7	9.1	$p < .01$
Algebra	117	24.4	14.9	$p < .01$
Geometry	100	18.1	11.8	$p < .01$
Biology	74	11.1	7.4	$p < .01$
Physics	28	19.1	6.4	$p < .01$
Chemistry	109	20.5	16.5	$p < .01$
History	117	11.2	8.5	$p < .01$

GRADE XI. BY SUBJECT. ALL STUDENTS SAMPLED.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS

SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I-YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE
Eng. Lit.	114	6.6	6.5	$p < .01$
Eng. Lang.	144	4.8	6.7	$p < .01$
Fr. Written	143	8.8	11.3	$p < .01$
Fr. Oral	129	8.0	9.3	$p < .01$
Algebra	152	13.3	13.5	$p < .01$
Geometry	131	13.9	10.3	$p < .01$
Biology	53	6.2	3.3	$p < .01$
Physics	136	15.0	11.3	$p < .01$
Chemistry	73	14.1	6.9	$p < .01$
History	142	11.6	10.5	$p < .01$

GRADE VIII. BY SUBJECT. STUDENTS WHO PASSED SUBJECT(S)

AT COMPLETION OF THE FIRST YEAR IN THE GRADE.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS.

SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I-YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE
Eng. Lit.	91	0.7	.75	p > .20 N.S.
Eng. Lang.	103	-0.1	.1	p > .20 N.S.
Fr. Written	50	6.0	6.3	p < .01
Fr. Oral	126	3.2	4.3	p < .01
Mathematics	29	9.2	4.5	p < .01
Science	42	3.3	2.1	p < .05
History	69	7.2	5.1	p < .01

GRADE IX. BY SUBJECT. STUDENTS WHO PASSED SUBJECT(S)

AT COMPLETION OF THE FIRST YEAR IN THE GRADE.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS.

SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I-YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE
Eng. Lit.	83	1.5	1.53	p > .10 N.S.
Eng. Lang.	103	1.0	1.37	p > .10 N.S.
Fr. Written	51	7.3	6.1	p < .01
Fr. Oral	100	4.9	6.1	p < .01
Geometry	41	9.7	5.2	p < .01
Algebra	15	15.7	4.7	p < .01
Science	44	7.1	5.2	p < .01
History	67	5.0	4.3	p < .01

GRADE VIII. BY SUBJECT. STUDENTS WHO PASSED SUBJECT(S)

AT COMPLETION OF THE FIRST YEAR IN THE GRADE.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS.

SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I-YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE
Eng. Lit.	91	0.7	.75	p > .20 N.S.
Eng. Lang.	103	-0.1	.1	p > .20 N.S.
Fr. Written	50	6.0	6.3	p < .01
Fr. Oral	126	3.2	4.3	p < .01
Mathematics	29	9.2	4.5	p < .01
Science	42	3.3	2.1	p < .05
History	69	7.2	5.1	p < .01

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Eng. Lit.	83	1.5	1.53	p > .10 N.S.
Eng. Lang.	103	1.0	1.37	p > .10 N.S.
Fr. Written	51	7.3	6.1	p < .01
Fr. Oral	100	4.9	6.1	p < .01
Geometry	41	9.7	5.2	p < .01
Algebra	15	15.7	4.7	p < .01
Science	44	7.1	5.2	p < .01
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AT COMPLETION OF THE FIRST YEAR IN THE GRADE.

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SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I-YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE	
Eng. Lit.	92	3.7	3.4	p < .01	
Eng. Lang.	100	2.8	3.4	p < .01	
Fr. Written	67	6.9	6.3	p < .01	
Fr. Oral	101	6.0	7.2	p < .01	
Algebra	43	18.0	8.6	p < .01	
Geometry	36	9.3	4.1	p < .01	
Biology	38	5.7	3.5	p < .01	
Physics	11	6.0	1.4	p > .10	N.S.
Chemistry	41	13.9	7.5	p < .01	
History	75	5.9	4.06	p < .01	

GRADE XI. BY SUBJECT. STUDENTS WHO PASSED SUBJECT(S)

AT COMPLETION OF THE FIRST YEAR IN THE GRADE.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEANS.

SUBJECT	NO. OF STUDENTS	MEANS. DIFFERENCE YR.I-YR.II	t SCORE	SIGNIFICANCE	
Eng. Lit.	85	3.8	3.8	p < .01	
Eng. Lang.	105	3.1	3.9	p < .01	
Fr. Written	87	6.0	6.8	p < .01	
Fr. Oral	90	5.4	5.5	p < .01	
Algebra	91	10.1	6.8	p < .01	
Geometry	75	6.1	4.1	p < .01	
Biology	33	.2	.1	p > .20	N.S.
Chemistry	79	9.1	6.0	p < .01	
Physics	38	6.7	3.5	p < .01	
History	88	7.0	6.4	p < .01	